

Triggered Responses

He drives fast, dangerously so, clenching and unclenching his hands on the steering wheel, his mind a torrent of images and barely constrained rage. He flexes his jaw in rhythm with his hands, grinding his teeth, his breath hissing through his nose, in out, in out, in out. (*controlgetcontrol*)

“Whore,” he whispers to the windshield, “Goddamn whore.” His hands itch for a bottle, his fingers for a cigarette, anything at all for *release*, an outlet for this internal pressure. He wants to find someone, anyone, and hit them. He wants pain, real physical pain, something that can be dealt with on some real level, anything but this horrible pressure in his head and chest that seems to only grow in intensity. Images flicker through his mind, unbidden, unwanted, merciless. Her on her knees with her mouth open, on her back with legs splayed in some room somewhere, her voice in his mind: yes yes you are so much better than my husband, the sucker, yes yes yes. (*stopit*)

Now on the exhale he emits a wordless noise: HEMMMMMM, HEMMMMMM, HEMMMMMM, and he rocks back and forth in his seat as he grips the steering wheel. He hasn’t touched a drink in over ten years, and he quit smoking at the same time. He can almost taste it, the whiskey; the chemical warmth spreading it’s nimble fingers through his blood, numbing him, helping him forget. (*no*) He can taste the smoke, rolling into his lungs, soothing him, relaxing him. (*no*) He comes close then, imagining the whiskey and smoke, close to taking the next exit, finding a bar or liquor store. So close... (*thatwillnothelpyou*) But no, he drives on in the dark and passes the exit.

He remembers his counselor’s voice: *Find that part of you that knows better*, he said, *that part that resists impulses, that is responsible. Find that part and give it a*

name, give it a voice. That part will speak to you, will help you resist your impulses, will help you to recognize your triggered responses. That responsible part of you can be your best friend in hard times. Find it, and give it a name. Names are powerful. Once something has a name it becomes real to us. When that responsible voice speaks to you try to listen. It is you, but you with your own best interests in mind. So he did, he gave the voice in his head a name and when it spoke, he listened.

He puts in a CD, something loud and aggressive from his youth, angry music with words that he can remember. He turns the stereo up, way up to the pain threshold, and he shouts along with the words, a release of sorts, and also an escape. He shouts along with the harsh angry music and for a while his mind is blessedly empty. He pounds on the steering wheel in time with the beat and just shouts and shouts and shouts.

His gaze slips from the road and his voice trails off as he sees a picture of his little girl wedged by the speedometer. His little girl, back at home in her bed, dreaming her innocent dreams, blissfully ignorant of the fact that their entire lives have been destroyed. (*youcannotleaveher*) His little girl, back in what used to be his home, his happy little life, back there with HER and her stupid lying whore face. He screams, an animal in a trap, and now it has nothing to do with music, it is just the pent up fury escaping however it can, through a wild animal howl. He screams into the windshield, saying no words, saying everything. (*youneedtostop*) He screams so long and so loud that he starts to cough, cough hard enough that he feels like he might vomit. (*stopthecarstopitnow*) He pulls the car over to the side of the road. He is not going to vomit. He is not going to vomit. He is not goi- He lurches out of the car just in time to spray a thin sickly liquid in the ditch. His stomach heaves again and nothing comes out, there is just the

compulsion, the clench of his guts and constriction of his throat. That's it, he thinks, I've got nothing left. He thinks again of a bottle, and the hot taste of whiskey (*no*) and the dirty and satisfying taste of smoke. (*nothatwillnothelpandyouknowit*) He breathes in the cold night air and it feels good, feels normal. He slumps on the other side of the ditch, and lays back in the grass.

I knew, he thinks, I just knew somehow.

He had sat up all night waiting for her, his wife, to get home from whatever poor excuse she had made to be gone, sat up all night drinking coffee that he wished was whiskey, and when she got home too late, her hair was messed up and she looked frantic. He watched her from the darkness of the kitchen as she entered. She looked shifty and guilty as hell.

"How was the meeting honey?" he said, and his voice seemed over-loud, like he was talking in a normal tone, but his volume was turned way up. She hadn't noticed him sitting there and jumped at the sound of his voice.

"Jesus, what are you doing there?" she said, and it was then that he knew. Right then, when her voice went wavery and she pulled unconsciously at her blouse as if to straighten it.

He stood and walked over to her.

"Where," he said slowly, "have you been all night?"

"Oh, you know," she said, not meeting his gaze. "After the meeting, Janey wanted me to come over and watch a movie. I fell asleep on her couch and she didn't wake me up." She backed a step away from him. "Are you OK?" she said.

“What movie was it?”

“Oh, some girly movie. You know.”

He could feel his teeth start to grind together. *Triggered responses*, his counselor had said, *Watch for them and you will be better able to control your anger. Remember*, his counselor had told him, *you control your anger, it does not control you.*

“Janey’s huh?” He could barely choke out the words. “Then why,” he asked, “is your shirt on inside-out?” It wasn’t, but she looked, and then he was really sure. “Who is he?” he hissed through his teeth.

She slumped then, like a balloon half-deflated.

“I never-” she started, then suddenly he was on her, his fist twisted in her shirt, and he could see the terror in her eyes. (*stopstoprightnow*) She thinks I’m going to kill her, he thought, *I think I’m going to kill her. Am I? (stopbreathestop)* They stood there in tableaux, her on her tiptoes, him with his fist pulled back, for what seemed like forever. (*breathe*) Then he took a deep breath, held it, released it, and dropped her. He turned away, grabbed his coat and left.

If she had said anything, he thinks, just one word, he would have turned back and hit her and then hit her again and again. He would have smashed her stupid lying whore face until there was nothing left but meat. But she didn’t, so he just got into the car and started driving. He feels a tear spill out of his eye and then another. He puts his head between his knees and just lets go. His body hitches and heaves uncontrollably and he cries out to the empty darkness, a bewildered sound of horror and grief, and he rolls onto his side and clutches at the grass. Out here in the empty darkness, he holds onto the

grass on a world that will not stop spinning and he screams and screams. His mind is flooded with images of his wife and her faceless lover, limbs tangled and sweaty. He can hear her voice husky with desire: I could never do this with my husband, you are so much better, give it to me, you are so much better than my husband, yes, so better, yes yes yes. He feels his stomach clench again, but there is nothing left inside.

“WHY?” he cries out to an uncaring world, “WHYWHYWHY?” He pulls out fistfuls of grass and he pounds the earth with his useless fists, mud splattering onto his face. “Christ, I LOVED YOU,” he cries into the darkness, “I loved you. You. Fucking. WHORE.” He hits the earth until his arms ache and his hands are bloody. He is exhausted now, lying face down on the side of the road way out in the middle of nowhere, way out in the empty dark. “Why?” he whispers into the ground, “Jesus Christ, why? I *loved* you.” He feels scraped out and empty, raw and open. He thinks again of his little girl, sleeping away this horrible horrible night. (*youhavetogoback*)

“I know,” he says aloud. He rolls onto his back and looks up into the empty sky. (*youcannotleaveyourlittlegirlyouhavetogoback*) “I know,” he whispers again, “I know goddamnit, I know.”